2014 Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Assistance to California
Specialty Crops

OVERVIEW

Fruits, nuts, vegetables, and other specialty crops are essential to a nutritious diet and are an important and thriving segment of California and U.S. agriculture. The USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) offers technical and financial assistance to specialty crop growers to enhance water, soil, air and other natural resources on their operations and to cope with environmental regulation.

CONSERVATION PLANNING

Every agricultural producer has a unique set of business and conservation goals. Conservation planning provides a basis for producers to sit down with NRCS conservationists and discuss goals, options for achieving those goals, and a timetable for implementing the steps to do so. The conservation practices supported by NRCS that are used in conservation plans have been compiled by the agency and validated from more than 75 years of on-the-ground experience.

California NRCS has found that projects based on the upfront work reflected in conservation plans tend to be successful. Therefore, producers with a conservation plan will typically receive priority for Farm Bill funding.

AIR

In California, air quality has become yet another environmental challenge for farmers, including those who grow specialty crops. Poor air quality can not only harm human health but can exacer-bate pest problems, interfere with optimal plant growth and can create a new set of regulatory compliance challenges.

NRCS can help landowners comply with regulations and improve on-farm air quality by identifying conservation activities appropriate on a given operation. These include upgrading to cleaner engines, reducing road dust, adopting conservation tillage, chipping orchard prunings and more.

WATER

Farming in California's arid climate presents perennial challenges for water conservation and water quality. Indeed, more specialty crop producers seek assistance from NRCS in California for these needs than any other. NRCS helps producers choose, install, and manage their irrigation system to optimize their water use. By using the right irrigation system, adding a tail-water return system to capture and reuse runoff, and/or controlling the rate, amount, and timing of water application, producers can promote optimum crop growth and water usage.

Switching irrigation systems (from flood to micro-sprinkler or drip), or monitoring soil moisture to better time irrigation schedules, are both water conserving options that specialty crop producers may want to consider. NRCS can provide technical and financial assistance on these and other water conservation practices.

SOIL AND WATER QUALITY

Farmers who manage their land in ways that improve and sustain soil health benefit from improved output and resiliency. Understanding and building good soil structure is important to nourishing, watering and supporting orchards, vines and other specialty crops.

Conservation practices like conservation tillage and using cover crops are a few of the ways that farmers can benefit from soil health management.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM (EQIP)

EQIP is a voluntary conservation program that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals. EQIP typically splits the cost of conservation projects with producers. Many specialty crop producers in California in recent years have used EQIP for Irrigation Water Management, soil health practices and air quality improvements.

CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CSP)

Farmers cannot be paid retroactively through EQIP for conservation work they have already undertaken. However, producers with comprehensive conservation systems on their farm or ranch should be well positioned to participate in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

CSP provides technical and financial assistance to those producers who already have applied the basic conservation practices and are willing to implement a higher level of conservation on their operations. Producers participating under CSP receive incentive payments for specified higher levels of conservation treatment.

HOW TO APPLY

Persons interested in participating in EQIP, CSP, or any other programs should contact their local NRCS Field Office. Applications are taken year-round at all NRCS field offices in California. Eligible projects will be periodically evaluated and prioritized for funding.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

While most EQIP contracts pay producers about 50 percent of the cost of structures or management, some producers may receive more financial assistance (75 or 90 percent) to offset the cost of implementing the conservation practices.

Beginning farmers and ranchers who served in the U.S. Armed Services will receive an application preference in certain EQIP and CSP application funding pools. Please inquire with your local NRCS service center if you are a military veteran.

For more information on NRCS Farm Bill conservation programs, visit:
www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ca/programs/

Common Conservation Activities

NRCS offers technical and financial assistance for dozens of conservation practices. Listed below are a few of those most commonly used by specialty crop producers.

CONSERVATION COVER

A permanent vegetative cover to reduce erosion and protect wildlife.

FILTER STRIPS

Areas of vegetation that filter sediment and pollutants from runoff and waste water. They can be placed at the lower edge of crop fields, above conservation practices such as terraces and diversions, or on fields adjacent to waterways.

IRRIGATION WATER MANAGEMENT

Determining and controlling the rate, amount, and timing of irrigation water in a planned and efficient manner to promote the desired crop response while minimizing soil erosion and offsite movement of pollutants, including movement to groundwater.

NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT

Managing the amount, form, placement, and timing of nutrient applications for optimum crop/forage yields, while minimizing the loss of nutrients to surface and groundwater, and maintaining or improving the chemical and biological condition of the soil.

COVER CROP

Growing grasses, legumes, and forbs for seasonal cover, erosion control, soil quality, nutrient cycling, biodiversity, and weed suppression.

WIND BREAKS

Linear plantings of single or multiple rows of trees or shrubs established to reduce wind erosion and protect crops from wind damage.

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